Labour rights training 2.0: The digitalisation of knowledge for workers in global supply chains

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online xxx

Keywords:
Labour rights
Transparency
Knowledge
Digital-training
Workers
Global supply chains
Social sustainability

ABSTRACT

There are manifold social sustainability issues in global supply chains (GSC), the question is whether digital-training can address them. For a long time, auditing, compliance and monitoring have been seen as key in solving labour right violations. Yet, little improvement has happened. More participative methods of auditing and training have therefore been proposed in order to remedy this situation. The purpose of this paper is to explore how workers are trained on their labour rights with a digital-training method. We present an in-depth case study of a digitalising labour rights training through a new-to-the-world training method aimed at reaching factory workers in the GSC context. The digital-training method is custom-designed in an application. It aims at encouraging and stimulating learning-processes, as well as at retaining knowledge on relevant labour right topics, guided by the local needs of the worker. We find that this digital-training method has indeed potential to revolutionise common issues encountered by traditional corporate-self regulation tools in GSCs. However, potential barriers, such as the accessibility for the worker and willingness of the factory management remain.

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1. Introduction

It is frequently emphasised that business needs to undertake major transformations in order to become more proactive in furthering sustainable development (Lozano, 2015). The literature on social sustainability has long lagged behind that of the environmental aspects (Carter and Rogers, 2008; Seuring et al., 2008), but is now emerging as a key part of sustainable development. Social sustainability carries many definitions and problematic aspects (Blowfield and Frynas, 2005), but is frequently defined as involving identifying and managing business impacts on people, and satisfying human needs (Brundtland, 1987). In this paper, we consider the workers’ training on their labour rights in global supply chains (GSCs) as a prime focus of social sustainability. These efforts affect a business’ social license to operate (e.g. Savitz and Weber, 2006). However, many companies have struggled with the management of social sustainability issues (Klassen and Vereecke, 2012). One of the reasons has been the difficulty into operationalising and measuring the social dimensions (Boström et al., 2012), and furthermore quantifying its business case.

The current debate surrounding promoting social sustainability in GSC contexts is centred around labour rights, and mainly its lack of enforcement therein (Egels-Zandén and Lindholm, 2015). Modern tools, such as Code of Conduct (CoC) agreements or third-party auditing schemes (Locke et al., 2013) are common methods used in the attempt to control labour rights in the GSCs. Little emphasis is placed on the efficacy of training methods, mainly due to the fact that it has been costly and resource-inefficient (Sum and Ngai, 2005). The role of digitalisation of training methods has yet to be discovered. Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore how workers are trained on their labour rights with the method of digital-training.2 We start with the global supply chain context of labour rights training, moving to a overview of the literature on worker training and digital-training of labour rights. Thereafter, follows a brief description of the case at hand and ensuing methodology choices. Subsequently, results are presented, and thereafter discussed.

2 In this paper, the term digital-training refers to the training of factory workers through e-learning on the following four criteria: workplace policies, health and safety, fire and building safety, workplace dialogue. These criteria conform to the suggestions of International Labour Organisation and Business Social Compliance Initiative. For the purpose of readability, we summarise these criteria under the umbrella term: labour rights.

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1 We are of course aware of the fact that there are other issues addressed in social sustainability as well, such as social equity (United Nations, 2017).
1.1. Outsourcing labour to the Global South\(^3\): China

The characteristics of the GSC from a Western perspective shows outsourcing occurring to less socially sustainable contexts, such as China. De facto in China and in several other neighbouring production countries, the actual labour laws are at times quite rigorous, yet, their implementation is not (Kolk et al., 2010). However, although countless efforts and protests against sweatshop conditions in the GSC, since the 1970s (Rivoli, 2014), workers’ social sustainability issues in terms of labour rights are frequently not met (Locke et al., 2013; Egels-Zandén and Lindholm, 2015). Although meeting these is situated at the centre of the social sustainability discourse, for companies to take responsibility for these issues, workers themselves are still frequently relegated to the periphery of this discussion. They are seldom part of developing any standards or frameworks guiding the CSR work (Leafy, 2001; Merk, 2009). With strong hierarchy, low literacy levels, and lack of knowledge of their rights (Taylor, 2011; Drebes, 2014), it is perhaps not surprising that this interaction seldom occurs. Attempts at combating this and advancing the knowledge of labour rights include enacting CoC agreements and third-party auditing schemes, lately also participatory auditing (Auret et al., 2006). Nevertheless, these techniques are results-oriented, such as testing afterwards what types of trainings have been provided or what types of business procedures have been followed. On rare occasions, these governance tools, focus on providing the knowledge through effective trainings in advance.

1.2. Training of workers on their labour rights: then and now

Technology does not influence society as an external force (Fischer, 1992; Coopmans, 2011). Rather, it allows people to use it in order to make what is already being done more efficiently. ICT is not the cause of social change, but rather is shaped by the social world. Thus, we contend that as the social world is constructed, so ICT too is constructed by it. This holds equally true, when it comes to achieving changes in the realm of social sustainability in a broader sense and the field of workers’ rights in a narrower sense. This means that ICT can possibly a driver for labour rights trainings, by means of providing workers with knowledge.

According to BSR report (2011) on worker training, one of the most important challenges is to deliver engaging training for workers. Sometimes workers have low literacy level, and when training, they are often tired from a long day. It is therefore important to be creative in designing an engaging method. As it is difficult to reach the entire workforce with conventional trainings, and with high turnover rates, it is often problematic to keep information available for all workers. Thus, the BSR report (2011) recommends emphasising simple key messages, and find ways to attract workers’ attention in a creative way. This can be done by using multimedia tools, such as videos that can be shown at lunch. Furthermore, the digitalisation of trainings can address common barriers to the implementation thereof, namely high costs and resource-inefficiency. Additionally, a digital version of trainings can be custom-designed for the needs of workers in varying contexts (BSR Report, 2011).

This exploratory study seeks to investigate whether a digital-training tool potentially delivers knowledge on workers’ rights. We thereby make four contributions to the field. First, we advance and develop Hult et al. (2006) model of eight knowledge elements and highlight its relevance in digitalised matters. Second, we focus on a sorely under-researched area of social sustainability, digital-training on labour rights, in a Global South context (Dobers and Haume, 2009; Anisul Huq et al., 2014). Third, we provide insight into the possibilities of digital-training as a tool for delivering knowledge on matters of social sustainability. Last, we contribute to the CoC and participatory auditing literature by showcasing a potentially groundbreaking method of training that addresses some participation deficits of traditional training methods used.

2. Literature review

2.1. Corporate self-regulation to govern social sustainability in global supply chains

The expectations on companies for taking responsibility for working conditions and rights have grown with the internationalisation of operations. This development is often labelled as corporations’ extended responsibility and resides at the crux of the discourse on Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Hahn et al., 2014; Hickle, 2017).

In the textile industry, global outsourcing of labour-intensive production has led to dispersed GSCs (Lund-Thomsen and Lindgreen, 2014). Global sourcing has become a way to solve this issue, but without assuming responsibility for its social issues (Drebes, 2014). Some of the most pressing issues concerning exploitative working conditions (Soundararajan and Brown, 2016), whilst the affected group, the workers, lack voice to engage (Khan et al., 2007; De Neve, 2009). The lack of voice to engage is attributed to varying cultural contexts. For instance, Global North buyers enforce standards and rules on Global South buyers, sometimes not considering local legislation or contexts (e.g. lack of birth certificates, etc.), hence making it difficult for Global South suppliers to comply. Nevertheless, various alternatives, and levels of engagement, remain in attempting to self-regulate the plethora of social issues in GSC. To rely solely on conventional government action for enforcing labour rights has frequently been deemed fruitless, due to lack of transnational regulation and poor enforcement of existing regulations (Coslovsky and Locke, 2013; Locke et al., 2013). Accordingly, typically Western, companies have primarily developed private governance tools, such as ethical CoCs and systems of factory audits (Bartley, 2007).

Indeed, codes and standards and the training thereof have made it possible to improve the safety of workers in factories (e.g. health and safety), as well as lessen the worst forms of child labour (De Neve, 2009). However, the effective implementation of the broader spectrum of labour rights has been less successful. Themes, such as freedom of association and collective bargaining, non-discrimination, gender-equality regulation and payment for overtime persist within challenges to be solved (Barrientos and Smith, 2007; De Neve, 2009). Barriers to the effectiveness of CoC and auditing are complex, of which three dilemmas are highlighted by the authors Sum and Ngai (2005). First, factory owners face the dilemma of either furthering competitive production (e.g. just-in-time production) or furthering labour rights for their workers. Second, the “management tale” (Sum and Ngai, 2005, p. 197) forces workers into an alliance with their managers when participating in auditing processes. Thereby, censoring the contradiction between social and economic goals in the company. Third, the process of institutionalisation of labour rights results in higher level of bureaucracy, thereby cannibalising time when workers are supposed to receive training. Furthermore, these trainings are often performed poorly, because the executive management lack political will or interest in furthering social sustainability agendas. These types of barriers are seen as mostly driven by the factory

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\(^3\) Global North, Global South respectively, are rather ideological concepts, than geographical concepts (Holling et al., 2015).
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